



Focus on Finding Water Use Solutions for Camps and Cabin Owners

From Ecology's Water Resources Program

Hundreds of water users face shutoff when snow pack levels in the Cascade Mountains are insufficient and surface water supplies are low in the Yakima River Basin. These water users include cabin owners and mountain camps that rely on surface water for their in-house needs. In 2006, the Legislature directed the state Department of Ecology (Ecology) to identify these water users and explore suggestions for resolving water conflicts between junior, senior, and unauthorized water users in the Yakima River Basin. A report to the legislature is due in December 2006.

In the past five years Washington State has experienced three drought years with more dry weather conditions expected to come. In 2001, 2004, and 2005 junior water right holders were told to turn off their water to protect senior water rights.

Surface water rights in the Yakima River Basin are under adjudication in Yakima County Superior Court. Those with water rights that are more than 100 years old have priority over other less-senior water rights. Some water rights are rationed during low water years while others are not entitled to use water at all.

Since 2001, junior water right holders **have been under a court order** to shut off their water when water for the Yakima Reclamation Project is rationed. Others may be using water without the benefit of a water right, which is not allowed under state law. Water users face court enforcement for violations.

The amount of water these cabins and camps use may be extremely small, but in the Yakima River Basin every drop of water counts. Some of these water users have been around since the 1930s when recreational cabins were first built. Many are willing to compensate for their water use if there is a way to do so, but they just never went through the process of applying for a water right.

What you can do

Senate Bill 6861 directs Ecology to identify property owners in the Yakima River Basin who rely on surface water supplies for their domestic use, and are either pro-ratable, junior or do not have a water right. Ecology has developed a web-based survey to identify those surface water users. Ecology's task is to provide the legislature with a sense of how many people are affected by future shut-offs and suggest possible solutions by the end of the year. We need everyone's help to do so by filling out a survey for Ecology.

Those participating in this survey may be eligible to participate in a program to obtain a water right that will not be interrupted or shut off. The survey and other information are available at: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cro/sb6861.html>.

Ecology staff will be meeting with recreational homeowners at association meetings, and make every effort to contact anyone who relies on surface water for their in-house domestic supply through mailings and public-record searches.

To complete Ecology's survey and more information about Senate Bill 6861, please visit:

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cro/sb6861.html>

To join the listserv, please e-mail:

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Background: How we got here

On May 10, 1905, all surface water that had not yet been appropriated in the Yakima River Basin was claimed by the United States on behalf of the Yakima Reclamation Project.

Senior water users are those with surface water rights dating earlier than May 10, 1905. Those users with surface water rights with a priority date after May 10, 1905 rationed when there is not enough water stored in reservoirs to meet the needs of all senior and pro-ratable users.

Currently, the United States Bureau of Reclamation routinely delivers more than 2 million acre-feet of water per year for irrigation and municipal supply in the Yakima River Basin. Senior water users contract for delivery of more than 1 million acre feet of water, and pro-ratable users hold a portion of the water right issued to the Bureau of Reclamation, which also totals about 1 million acre feet.

Junior water right holders are those with water rights that date after May 10, 1905. Junior water rights total approximately 100,000 acre feet.

For more information

More information on Senate Bill 6861 and the survey can be found on the Web site at:
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cro/sb6861.html>.

The Web site also includes an e-mail listserv for water users interested in the progress of the report, or to receive a copy of the bill. To get on the listserv directly, e-mail: sb6861@ecy.wa.gov.

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